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Russia: Situation and treatment of Jews, state protection and support services
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Estimates of the number of Jews living in Russia vary (AP 9 Nov. 2007; MRGI n.d.). The 2002 national census counted 233,439 Jewish people in Russia (MRGI n.d.). The United States (US) Department of State similarly estimates that 250,000 of Russia's 142 million people are Jews (US Sept. 2008, Sec. 1; *ibid.* 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 2). However, some media sources estimate that as many as 1,000,000 (Reuters 26 Feb. 2008; *ibid.* 6 May 2008) or 1,500,000 people in Russia are Jews (AP 9 Nov. 2007). Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) indicates that the Jewish population in Russia has decreased by half since 1989 (MRGI n.d.) due to emigration in the years leading up to and following the collapse of the Soviet Union (*ibid.*; AP 9 Nov. 2007). Sources report that most Jews live in urban areas, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg (*ibid.*; US Sept. 2008, Sec. 1).

Sources indicate that there has been a revival of the Jewish religion and culture in Russia (MRGI n.d.), including the construction of a number of new synagogues and cultural centres (AP 9 Nov. 2007; FJNCA 9 July 2009). According to Russian Jewish leaders, there are more than 200 Jewish communities throughout Russia, 5 Jewish universities, 94 Jewish Sunday schools (FJNCA 9 July 2009; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 2), 50 synagogues and community centres, and 29 Jewish day schools (FJNCA 9 July 2009). There are also plans to establish a museum commemorating the Holocaust (ITAR-TASS 13 Aug. 2009; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 2). According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008*, the Moscow municipal government has donated land to house a number of Jewish community buildings, including a school, hospital and museum (*ibid.*).

Several sources indicate that some Russian Jews who emigrated from Russia to Israel, the US, or other Western countries, are returning to Russia for job opportunities (Reuters 26 Feb. 2008; MRGI n.d.; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 2). The President of the Russian Jewish Congress, as reported by Reuters, estimates that 80,000 to 120,000 Russian Jews have returned (6 May 2008).

Sources indicate that anti-Semitism remains a serious problem in Russian society (US Sept. 2008, Sec. 3; MBHR 2008). According to a public opinion poll in 2007, 17 percent of respondents did not want Jews as work colleagues and 28 percent did not want Jews to become members of their family (MBHR 2008).

Tel Aviv University's Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism, *Country Reports 2008*, and human rights organizations report attacks against Jewish individuals, attacks against synagogues, anti-Semitic vandalism, and desecration of Jewish cemeteries in 2007 and 2008 (Stephen Roth Institute 2007; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 3; MBHR 2008; SOVA 17 Mar. 2009; HRF 2008a; *ibid.* 2008b).

The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a Russian human rights organization which monitors hate crimes in Russia (SOVA n.d.), reports that in 2007, 13 Jews were injured in nine incidents of racially motivated violence and in 2008 3 Jews were attacked (SOVA 17 Mar. 2009). The Moscow Bureau for Human Rights (MBHR) reports eight attacks or attempted attacks on Jews in 2008 (MBHR 2008). In one example, on 11 June 2007, skinheads attacked and injured 3 members of a Jewish congregation in Ivanovo, including the 69-year-old rabbi (HRF 2008a). One offender was convicted and sentenced to four years' imprisonment for hooliganism and incitement to religious hatred (*ibid.*).

SOVA reports 30 acts of anti-Semitic vandalism in 2007 and 24 acts in 2008 (SOVA 17 Mar. 2009). According to SOVA, Jewish sites were the most common targets of hate vandalism in 2007 and 2008 (*ibid.*). SOVA reports nine acts of vandalism targeting Jewish sites and fourteen acts of Neo-Nazi vandalism targeting urban sites or World War Two memorials in the first half of 2009 (*ibid.* 29 July 2009). MBHR reports nine attacks on synagogues or other Jewish buildings, nine cases of desecrated Jewish graves or monuments to Holocaust

victims, and twenty-nine cases of vandalism involving anti-Semitic graffiti in 2008 (MBHR 2008). On 1 June 2008 in Dzerzhinsk, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at a synagogue, causing a small fire outside the building (US Sept. 2008, Sec. 3).

Sources report the widespread availability of anti-Semitic literature, articles and leaflets in Russia, despite legislation that forbids extremism (ibid.; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 3; Stephen Roth Institute 2007). According to the Stephen Roth Institute and MBHR, the Jewish blood libel myth, which claims that Jews use the blood of Christian children in their rituals, was a recurring subject of radical nationalists (Stephen Roth Institute 2007; MBHR 2008).

Human rights organizations report a rise of nationalist, neo-Nazi and skinhead groups in Russia in the past several years (HRF 2008a; SOVA 15 Apr. 2009; UCSJ 2007). According to SOVA and MBHR, most of these radical nationalist groups are anti-Semitic as a part of their ideological foundation and promote anti-Semitic propaganda (SOVA 17 Mar. 2009). Sources indicate, though, that these groups primarily target visible ethnic minorities and migrants in violent attacks (ibid.; HRF 2008a; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 2; Reuters 6 May 2008).

State Protection

Russian Jewish organizations, *Country Reports 2008*, and other sources indicate that the Russian government does not sanction anti-Semitism (FJNCA 9 July 2009; US 25 Feb. 2009; MRGI n.d.; AP 9 Nov. 2007).

Article 105 of Russia's Criminal Code provides stricter sentences for murder "committed by reason of national, racial, or religious hatred" (Russia 13 June 1996). In addition, Article 63 defines "commission of a crime by reason of national, racial, or religious hatred or enmity" as an "aggravating circumstance" (ibid.). Article 282 of Russia's Criminal Code prohibits:

[a]ctions aimed at the incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as abasement of dignity of a person or a group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, as well as affiliation to any social group, if these acts have been committed in public or with the use of mass media. (ibid.)

Article 282.1 prohibits the creation of extremist groups, organized to prepare or carry out crimes motivated by "ideological, political, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity" and prohibits "participation in an extremist community" (ibid.).

Sources indicate that many hate crimes, including those motivated by anti-Semitism, are prosecuted only as "hooliganism" (Reuters 6 May 2008; US Sept. 2008, Sec. 2; HRF 2008c; UCSJ 2007). In one example, when four minors vandalized a Jewish school in Bryansk in October 2007, while shouting white supremacy epithets, the hate motivation of the crime was dropped; instead, charges were changed to hooliganism and vandalism (HRF 2008b).

The Russian Commissioner for Human Rights reports that law-enforcement bodies do not always properly investigate crimes committed against religious organizations, creating an atmosphere of "impunity" (Russia 2008, 56). According to the Commissioner's report, the police did not investigate attacks against two synagogues in Astrakhan and Khabarovsk in 2006 until the Commissioner intervened (ibid., 55). The MBHR similarly reports that law-enforcement bodies sometimes ignore anti-Semitism (MBHR 2008).

According to SOVA, "counteraction to anti-Semitism in Russia has substantially improved in Russia over the past few years"; while promoting anti-Semitic propaganda was hardly prosecuted from 2004 to 2006, from 2007 to 2008, 22 of 70 hate-speech convictions were for inciting anti-Semitism, although in 9 of the 22 cases, offenders received only probation sentences (17 Mar. 2009). SOVA also reports that many high-profile ultra-nationalists who promote anti-Semitism are not prosecuted (ibid.).

The Russian military has instated a Jewish rabbi (*The Straits Times* 6 May 2008; US Sept. 2008, Sec. 2). President Dmitry Medvedev has met with the chief rabbi and other Jewish leaders to resolve issues (ITAR-TASS 5 Dec. 2007; FJC 22 May 2009). According to Human Rights First (HRF), an international human rights organization based in New York, both Medvedev and his predecessor Vladimir Putin have spoken out against anti-Semitism (HRF 2008c). Prior to his election, propaganda was disseminated alleging that Medvedev had Jewish origins (Reuters 6 May 2008; SOVA 17 Mar. 2009; MBHR 2008).

In March 2009, Russian media sources reported that two foreign rabbis were expelled from Russia for unspecified reasons (Interfax 11 Mar. 2009; ITAR-TASS 11 Mar. 2009). According to Russia's chief rabbi, Berel Lazar, 40 percent of the rabbis in Russia come from abroad and these expulsions have caused Jews to "fear for

the future of their community in Russia" (ibid.; Interfax 11 Mar. 2009). The chief rabbi also suggested that it was an attempt by authorities to "look for an enemy" during the economic crisis (ibid.; ITAR-TASS 11 Mar. 2009).

Support Services

There are a number of national Jewish organizations active in Russia, including the Federal Jewish National and Cultural Autonomy, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, and the Confederation of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Russia (FJNCA 9 July 2009). Russia's chief rabbi, Berel Lazar, is affiliated with the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJC n.d.a), which receives support from international foundations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Israeli government (FJC n.d.b).

The Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union (UCJS) is a human rights union founded in 1970 and based in the US, which monitors hate crimes in Russia and other areas of the former Soviet Union (Coalition Against Hate n.d.) It is a founding member of the Coalition Against Hate, a partnership of over 25 human rights groups in Russia which campaigns against anti-Semitism, xenophobia and religious discrimination (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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